

"How I Got Rich by Honest Graft"

Life in Tammany Hall

George W. Plunkitt

Mark Twain referred to the late nineteenth century as the "Gilded Age" because he believed wealth was gilding the corruption of American society. At the local level, political machines—led by "bosses"—bought votes by promising immigrants food, shelter, and other needed services. Bosses also received kickbacks from people who wanted city jobs and companies that wanted city contracts. The most notorious political machine was Tammany Hall in New York City. George W. Plunkitt, a Tammany Hall boss, argued in favor of "honest graft."

Everybody is talking these days about Tammany men growing rich on graft, but nobody thinks of drawing the distinction between honest graft and dishonest graft. There's all the difference in the world between the two. Yes, many of our men have grown rich in politics. I have myself. I've made a big fortune out of the game, and I'm getting richer every day, but I've not gone in for dishonest graft—black-nailing gamblers, saloon-keepers, disorderly people, etc.—and neither has any of the men who have made big fortunes in politics.

There's honest graft, and I'm an example of how it works. I might sum up the whole thing by saying: "I seen my opportunities and I took 'em."

Just let me explain by examples. My party's in power in the city, and it's going to undertake a lot of public improvements. Well, I'm tipped off, say, that they're going to lay out a new park at a certain place.

I see my opportunity and I take it. I go to that place and I buy up all the land I can in the neighborhood. Then the board of this or that makes its plan public, and here is a rush to get my land, which nobody cared particular for before.

Ain't it perfectly honest to charge a good price and make a profit on my invest-

ment and foresight? Of course it is. Well, that's honest graft.

Or supposing it's a new bridge they're going to build. I get tipped off and I buy as much property as I can that has to be taken for approaches. I sell at my own price later on and drop some more money in the bank.

Wouldn't you? It's just like looking ahead in Wall Street or in the coffee or cotton market. It's honest graft, and I'm looking for it every day [of] the year. I will tell you frankly that I've got a good lot of it, too. . . .

I've told you how I got rich by honest graft. Now, let me tell you that most politicians who are accused of robbing the city get rich the same way.

They didn't steal a dollar from the city treasury. They just seen their opportunities and took them. That is why, when a reform administration comes in and spends a half million dollars in trying to find the public robberies they talked about in the campaign, they don't find them.

The books are always all right. The money in the city treasury is all right. Everything is all right. All they can show is that the Tammany heads of departments looked after their friends, within

the law, and gave them what opportunities they could to make honest graft. Now, let me tell you that's never going to hurt Tammany with the people. Every good man looks after his friends, and any man who doesn't isn't likely to be popular. . . .

Tammany was beat in 1901 because the people were deceived into believing that it worked dishonest graft. They didn't draw a distinction between dishonest and honest graft, but they saw that some Tammany men grew rich and supposed they had been robbing the city treasury or levying

blackmail on disorderly houses, or working in with the gamblers and lawbreakers.

As a matter of policy, if nothing else, why should the Tammany leaders go into such dirty business when there is so much honest graft lying around when they are in power? Did you ever consider that?

Now, in conclusion, I want to say that I don't own a dishonest dollar. If my worst enemy was given the job of writing my epitaph when I'm gone, he couldn't do more than write: "George W. Plunkitt. He Seen His Opportunities, and He Took 'Em."

"Wall Street Owns the Country"

The Birth of Populism

Mary Lease

Farmers in the South and the West faced many hardships in the 1870s, which led them to political action. Railroads charged high prices to transport farm products, deflation increased the value of farmers' debts, and expanded farm production sharply reduced prices. Many farmers blamed these economic conditions on the eastern financial establishment.

In 1891, various farmers' organizations formed the People's party, known as the Populists. In their 1892 platform, Populists advocated a shorter workday, women's suffrage, democratic reforms such as direct election of senators, and government ownership of transportation and communication lines. Mary Lease, a Kansas Populist known for admonishing farmers to "raise less corn and more hell," stated the Populist cause in this excerpt from one of her many speeches.



Mary Lease was one of the most popular speakers for the People's party, in which women played a significant role.

This is a nation of inconsistencies. The Puritans fleeing from oppression became in turn oppressors. We fought England for our liberty and put chains on 4 million blacks. We wiped out

slavery and by our tariff laws and national banks began a system of white wage slavery worse than the first. Wall Street owns the country. It is no longer a government of the people, by the people, and for the

people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street. The great common people of this country are slaves, and monopoly is the master.

The West and South are bound and prostrate before the manufacturing East. Money rules, and our vice president is a London banker. Our laws are the output of a system which clothes rascals in robes and honesty in rags. The parties lie to us and the political speakers mislead us.

We were told two years ago to go to work and raise a big crop, that was all we needed. We went to work and plowed and planted; the rains fell, the sun shone, nature smiled, and we raised the big crop that they told us to—and what came of it? Eight-cent corn, ten-cent oats, two-cent beef, and no price at all for butter and eggs—that's what came of it. Then the politicians said we suffered from overproduction. Overproduction, when 10,000 little children, so statistics tell us, starve to death every year in the United States, and over 100,000 shop girls in New York are forced to sell their virtue for the bread their niggardly wages deny them. . . .

Kansas suffers from two great robbers, the Santa Fe Railroad and the loan companies. The common people are robbed to enrich their masters. There are

30,000 millionaires in the United States. Go home and figure out how many paupers you must have to make one millionaire with the circulation only \$10 per capita. There are thirty men in the United States whose aggregate wealth is over one and one-half billion dollars. There are half a million men looking for work. There are 60,000 soldiers of the Union in poor-houses, but no bondholders. It would have been better if Congress had voted pensions to those 60,000 paupers who wore the blue and dyed it red with their blood in the country's defense than to have voted to make the bankers' bonds nontaxable and payable, interest and principal, in gold.

We want money, land, and transportation. We want the abolition of the national banks, and we want the power to make loans direct from the government. We want the accursed foreclosure system wiped out. Land equal to a tract thirty miles wide and ninety miles long has been foreclosed and bought in by loan companies of Kansas in a year. We will stand by our homes and stay by our fireside by force if necessary, and we will not pay our debts to the loan-shark companies until the government pays its debts to us. The people are at bay; let the bloodhounds of money who have dogged us thus far beware.

"Let Us Quit the Old Party"

A Black Farmer Endorses Populism

S.D.D.

Populists supported increasing the amount of money in circulation to help farmers pay their debts. To do this, they advocated using a silver standard to back federal money, rather than the strict gold standard desired by the eastern financiers—known as "goldbugs." A black Georgia farmer—identified only by his initials, S.D.D.—argued in favor of the Populist monetary policy in an 1892 letter to the editor. He also noted southern Democrats' fear that a victory by the Populist party would give African Americans more political power.

Ever since the reform movement began, we colored people have had more advice given us by the Democrats than we have had before or since freedom. Their advice is for us to stick to the Republican party.

In the [1884] race between [Grover] Cleveland and [James G.] Blaine, they did not give us such advice, nor in the Cleveland and [Benjamin] Harrison campaign [in 1888] did they tell us to vote the Republican ticket. But now, since the laboring men of the North, South, and West have seen their families in want of food and raiment and their children growing up without education, they have looked into the causes of their poverty. They have petitioned Congress for some measure of relief, but Congress has laughed at their petitions and told them to go home and work harder and eat less. We have gone home and worked harder and eaten less, and find ourselves in a worse condition than before.

Now we are told that we are naked and hungry because we worked too hard and made too much cotton in the South and too much wheat, corn, and meat in the West.

Now, since we could see no hope of better times through the old parties and have got together and formed a new party—a People's party—the Democrats are kicking terribly, for Colonel Livingston says it will bring about Negro supremacy—it will wipe out the color line.

Now . . . we don't want to rule the government; we don't want to come into your family; we don't want to enter your schoolhouses or your churches. But I tell

you what we do want: We want equal rights at the ballot box and equal justice before the law; we want better wages for our labor and better prices for our produce; we want more money in circulation to pay for our labor or our produce; we want to lift the mortgage from the old cow and mule which they have carried till they are sway-backed; we want to school our children; and we want a chance to earn a home.

We can never realize these wants without more money in circulation.

Our old people have been working for twenty-seven years and have not got a dollar laid by for old age. But the goldbugs are laying up money every day and plenty to spare to carry elections.

The Democrats have hired such of our ministers as they could to go to work among our people to save the old Republican party. Who ever heard the like before—white Democrats hiring colored men to vote the Republican ticket?

They call the Republicans their enemies, yet they hire colored men to bring out candidates and vote the Republican ticket. The object is to defeat the People's party, so if the Democrats are beaten the Republicans will win, because they know they will be brothers when they get to Washington anyway.

It seems to be a hard thing for us colored men to give up the Republican party, but let us stop and consider: We are living in another man's house, working another man's land, and our smokehouse and meal-tub are in town.

Let us quit the old party and vote for wife and children and a chance for a home.

"The Property of the People"

An Army of the Unemployed Marches on the Capitol

Jacob S. Coxey

During the severe depression of 1894, millions of people were unemployed. Jacob S. Coxey of Ohio, a Populist, led an "army" of unemployed people in a march to Washington to demand government relief. "Coxey's Army"

advocated that money be issued to stimulate the economy and that the government create jobs with a road construction program. Coxey and others were arrested for walking on the grass of the U.S. Capitol. Anticipating such action, Coxey prepared a protest, but was not allowed to deliver it. Coxey's protest was later published in the Congressional Record.

The Constitution of the United States guarantees to all citizens the right to peaceably assemble and petition for redress of grievances, and furthermore declares that the right of free speech shall not be abridged.

We stand here today to test these guarantees of our Constitution. We choose this place of assemblage because it is the property of the people, and if it be true that the right of the people to peacefully assemble upon their own premises and utter their petition has been abridged by the passage of laws in direct violation of the Constitution, we are here to draw the eyes of the entire nation to this shameful fact. Here, rather than at any other spot upon the continent, it is fitting that we should come to mourn over our dead liberties and by our protest arouse the imperiled nation to such action as shall rescue the Constitution and resurrect our liberties.

Upon these steps where we stand has been spread a carpet for the royal feet of a foreign princess, the cost of whose lavish entertainment was taken from the public treasury without the consent or the approval of the people. Up these steps the lobbyists of trusts and corporations have passed unchallenged on their way to committee rooms, access to which we, the representatives of the toiling wealth-producers, have been denied. We stand here today in behalf of millions of toilers whose petitions have been buried in committee rooms, whose prayers have been unresponded to, and whose opportunities for honest, remunerative, productive labor have been taken from them by unjust legislation, which protects idlers, speculators, and gamblers. . . .

We stand here to remind Congress of its promise of returning prosperity should the Sherman Act [requiring U.S. purchase of silver] be repealed. We stand here to declare by our march of over 400 miles through difficulties and distress, a march unstained by even the slightest act which would bring the blush of shame to any, that we are law-abiding citizens, and as men our actions speak louder than words. We are here to petition for legislation which will furnish employment for every man able and willing to work; for legislation which will bring universal prosperity and emancipate our beloved country from financial bondage to the descendants of King George. We have come to the only source which is competent to aid the people in their day of dire distress. We are here to tell our representatives, who hold their seats by grace of our ballots, that the struggle for existence has become too fierce and relentless. We come and throw up our defenseless hands and say, help, or we and our loved ones must perish. We are engaged in a bitter and cruel war with the enemies of all mankind—a war with hunger, wretchedness, and despair, and we ask Congress to heed our petitions and issue for the nation's good a sufficient volume of the same kind of money which carried the country through one awful war and saved the life of the nation.

. . . We have assembled here in violation of no just laws to enjoy the privileges of every American citizen. We are now under the shadow of the Capitol of this great nation, and in the presence of our national legislators are refused that dearly bought privilege, and by force of arbitrary power prevented from carrying out the desire of our hearts which is plainly granted under the great Magna Carta of our national liberties.